

**What shall I do with my ignorance (or, is there anything new after  
Durkheim, Wittgenstein, and Weber?) (2004)<sup>1</sup>**

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It was foolish to have accepted the invitation of Elisa Reis to discuss in fifteen minutes the papers of this section, my only excuse being that I wanted somehow to be present and participate in your exchanges. It should also confess my ignorance: not being a theoretical sociologist, I am not familiar with many of the authors and concepts you are using. Still, since I am here, I will have to do my best with whatever I have.

The only advantage I can claim is to have read all the papers in quick succession, and from this I get a general impression which I would like to share: the impression is that, at the bottom, the papers deal with two or three central issues, which I can represent by the names of Durkheim, Wittgenstein and Weber.

I was reminded of Durkheim and Wittgenstein because of a common central insight, which is that society is not built by the interaction of free, acting individuals, but, on the contrary, that interactions take place in terms of preexisting institutions and networks. Durkheim believed also that interactions, to take place in a stable and orderly way, required a common culture and a common set of values, associated with the feeling of belongingness to a common society, and institutions dedicated to the reinforcement of these feelings and values. I read Alexander's elaborations on the concept of fusion and re-fusion, and the discussion of De La Fuente on the ritual nature of concerts and public spectacles, as reinstatements of this basic Durkheimian insight. I also see in Alexander's text a stand in the decades-old debate between structural sociologists and rational choice theorists, both within sociology and, more importantly, outside it, in the sphere of economic theory and the economist's incursion into our turf. No, society is not produced by the free choices and decisions of individuals, but with their ability to link back to something much deeper, through rituals and performances, rather than by calculations,

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games and opportunistic coalitions. The same issue appears in the paper by José Maurício Domingues, when he talks about the modern social movements and contrasts the American, utilitarian interpretations with the European brand, more prone to give them a deeper historical interpretation.

Wittgenstein is not usually mentioned in the sociological literature, and I am far from a Wittgenstein specialist. I would like to refer here, however, to an important exception, which is his reading by David Bloor, one of the founders of the modern sociology of science.<sup>2</sup> Bloor starts from the central intuition of the Second Wittgenstein (the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*) that concepts and knowledge do not emerge from the relationships between individual minds and the external world, but as part of interactions that take place between individuals that are socially bounded and created, and described by Wittgenstein by the expression “language games”. This intuition is not different from that of Durkheim, that society precedes the individuals and their concepts and ideas. The main difference, of course, is that Wittgenstein deals directly with issues of logic and language, while Durkheim does not. One interpretation of this, which Bloor and other sociologists of science have been charged of carrying too far, is the notion that there is nothing in scientific knowledge beyond social convention. There is no need, however, to go that far, and get involved in the hazards of the still on-going “science wars”, or the disputes about the proper readings of Wittgenstein’s obscure texts<sup>3</sup>. The most interesting contribution of Bloor’s seems to be his effort to develop a typology of language games, following the known theory of “ways of life” developed by Mary Douglas. I learned a great deal from the paper on *Applications of Pragmatism in Social Theory* by Thamy Pogrebinski, and my sense is that, although coming from a very different intellectual tradition, he deals with problems which are very similar to those that preoccupied Wittgenstein and some of his interpreters in the social sciences.

If social life is more than individual actions and interactions, “society” has a reality of its own, which conditions our knowledge and to which we have to fuse, in order to be effective in our endeavors. How is this society? Does it change, or remains always

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<sup>2</sup> David Bloor, *Knowledge and social imagery*, Routledge direct editions (London, Boston, 1976), David Bloor, *Wittgenstein a social theory of knowledge* (New York, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> {Hacking, 1984 #17816}

the same? This is the other classic debate in sociology that pitches Durkheim and the functionalists against Karl Marx and the historical tradition. I think most of you will agree that Max Weber is the author that provided us with the best answers to this dilemma, by combining the historical and comparative methods with a detailed and complex view of social institutions and cultures. The notion of “horizons”, presented by Domingues in his discussion of contemporary social movements, looks to me as an attempt to go back to a soft version of Marxist (or Hegelian) evolutionist approach. No, social movements are not just ad hoc events, because they have a potentiality to change reality and to construct a new future, although we don’t what this future may be like.

In short, I see that these papers deal with the central issues of contemporary social sciences: the tensions between individualism, knowledge, rational choice and collective action, on one side, and this obscure and sometimes denied object called “society” on the other. In very broad terms, our classics have pointed the way out of these dilemmas long ago: we cannot dismiss the existence of society, but society is under permanent construction and reconstruction by individual and collective actions of different kinds. But this, of course, is almost a truism, and the question is whether we have actually moved beyond these original intuitions, or are still moving in circles.

## References

- Bloor, David. *Knowledge and social imagery*, *Routledge direct editions*. London, Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1976.
- — —. *Wittgenstein a social theory of knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.